

Rethinking Final Year Projects and Dissertations: Creative Honours and Capstone Projects.

1. Example title:

Creative Exchange: Multidisciplinary Media Arts Practice in an Industry Context

2. Contact details and context

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Subject title: NM3104: Creative Exchange (CXC)
Class size: 70 (2011)

3. Please describe the main features of the project and the learning outcomes

Creative Exchange (CXC) is designed to capitalise on a common thread of interdisciplinary practice built into the New Media Arts degree program. Featuring five disciplines, Sound and Music Media, Illustration and Visual Media, Contemporary Theatre, Media Design and Photo Media, the degree teaches students the practical and theoretical concerns and specificities of each area through a core program of subjects that focuses on convergent production methodologies.

This theoretical and technical base is designed to foster a connected, multi-arts literate cohort of students who by their third year in the degree are ready to commit to a major project. Generally this will be one of four subjects that a third year student will take; the others being two discipline subjects and a professional practice subject. Projects are devised by staff, students and the wider community and are observed at close quarters by a panel of industry and academic personnel. It is common that these projects demand a rapid expansion into technical areas that either build on existing skill-sets or draw from available (and willing) expertise in the local creative industry sector.

While attempts have been made in the past to formally approach other departments this tends not to work unless there is a commitment from staff and Heads of School. At the moment we tend to attract students in a number of ways:

- Students who have heard about the subject through their peers and take it as an elective;
- Students who have had contact with our subjects previously (commonly IT students);
- Or, students studying one of our disciplines as a minor in their degree (commonly Education and Business students).

Currently I am involved in a working group within the Faculty of Law, Business and the Creative Arts to try and find a model that will work as a capstone across the whole faculty.

The fundamental structure is as follows:

- Students are approached in mid-Semester One of their third year in a subject, *Connecting the Creative Arts*, which is designed to dovetail into CXC. The expectations of a CXC project team are clearly explained. Possible staff, client and community projects are canvassed and students are also encouraged to design their own projects.

- Each project team must include at least 3 disciplines. This might include student expertise from outside of the school and in the past has featured students and staff from Information Technology, Education, Anthropology and Business.
- Each project team must develop a professional “shop front” to represent their professional identity online and in the public space. This used to help them make the transition from student to practitioner. (CXC is run concurrently with a core subject *Professional Practice* in which students develop their own personal portfolios and professional identity collateral).
- Built into the program is a heavily structured pre-production phase which takes its cues from production based methodologies commonly found in film, game and media design studios. These documents are developed early, often pre-semester, and evaluated by a panel of industry professionals who are representative of the major disciplines from the New Media Arts program.
- Each project must achieve an outcome. Prototypes and simulations are avoided unless the complexity of the task is not achievable within the constraints of the semester. In such cases students must demonstrate a workable and practical model that can be pursued beyond University.
- All projects must have a public or industry relevant launch event. Students are encouraged to engage with local venues and event management professionals and spend a considerable amount of time developing logistical run sheets, Occupational Health and Safety plans, promotional material and media savvy PR collateral with the Schools Community Engagement and Events Officer and Facilities Management team.

4. How do you assess the work and what evidence do you have that standards are comparable with more traditional formats?

CXC is based on industry expectations and strives to model its assessment design on practical milestones that reflect production methodologies from a variety of industry sectors.

Project Proposals (Not Assessed)

Projects and the make-up of teams are vetted late in Semester One - prior to the beginning of CXC in Semester Two of each year - via a Project Proposal document and follow-up “pitch” to academic staff. During this process students are encouraged to achieve the appropriate balance between the make-up of their team and the potential scope of the project. Sometimes, on the advice of the subject coordinator and discipline staff, students are advised to amalgamate like-minded teams, revise their projects ambitions or provide further evidence of the team’s capabilities or the merit of the project. This can be a long process and involves a steady administrative commitment from the subject coordinator. As it is a non-graded part of the subject this can be a lengthy and cumbersome process especially when part of this process involves motivating students to work through staff requests and meet preliminary deadlines between teaching periods.

Industry & Academic Panel Pitch

The Project Pitch to an Industry & Academic Panel, which occurs early in the semester, usually week 4 or 5, is the point at which all project teams receive their first piece of deep project feedback. Students are made well aware that depending on the make up of their interdisciplinary team - and therefore the ambitions of their project - that they will be measured by discipline coordinators from their respective majors and where practically possible representatives from industry.

Pre-Production Documentation

This is submitted to the Industry Panel prior to the Pitch Presentation. Typically the documentation will include production schedules, call sheets, visual research, industry comparisons, role descriptions, technical requirements, project identity collateral (logos, manifestos, slug lines, social media integration, etc.) as well as practical considerations such as layouts, mock-ups, preliminary character designs, teaser trailers, flowcharts, storyboards and script extracts. While the documentation is measured for its competency and industry relevant formatting, the appearance and design of the physical submission is also taken into consideration.

Industry Consultation

Students are encouraged by the way of an Industry Consultation Document to keep seeking practical and qualitative advice from industry for their discipline specific role in the group effort. This should include recommendations, quotes, observations and explanatory notes of any specific changes that resulted from these interactions. Industry reps must sign off this document to confirm that the communications did in fact occur in the manner in which they are described.

Final Project Rubric Design

In consultation with academic staff and following a briefing on rubric design, students author their own rubrics for the final project. This also incorporates criteria concerning the documentation of the launch event and the technical parameters for the submissions of all digital and physical media components.

The rubric categories are: *Realisation of Concept, Archival and Event Documentation of Creative Product, Technical Criteria, Interdisciplinary New Media Arts Practice*. Students then define more specific criteria within each of these areas depending on the desired project outcome. A moderation panel of five staff then mark the projects based on these criteria.

Project Moderation

During the course of the semester students meet with discipline staff to sign off on production milestones and for staff to evaluate the general well being of the project team as a functioning production unit. Staff then meet after each milestone to discuss each group's progress and compare notes and observations.

The Launch Event (Not Assessed)

The end of semester public launches and industry events are not assessed although staff do attend and students put a considerable amount of work into their design and execution. Students also work closely with the Schools Community Engagement & Events Officer in developing momentum towards the event - how to create a buzz, how to approach the media and how to best facilitate fund-raising/teaser events.

In some cases, the launch events are the entrepreneurial debut of what is intended to be an on going business, a creative service or a creative partnership rather than the "end" of a project's life cycle.

The project launches are seen as the culmination of each project's journey and is discussed in Week One as a vital component in a projects lifecycle. It can also be a galvanising moment for the cohort as the "season of events" represents a major stepping stone for the degrees graduating group of students. As we close in on the launch events I reinforce the collegial and social value of students coming out and supporting each project and I remind them that such occasions are rare - they may never be together in such numbers, in such a positive setting, again.

5. Hot tips and things to look for:

- Students feel over worked. This must be dealt with early on. Previous examples of what can be achieved, industry case studies and production studio workflows, are discussed in a variety of subjects that pre-empt CXC in the second and third year.
- Universities generally are not designed to facilitate the “all or nothing” approach that CXC imbues in students. This can cause tension in other classes but generally staff within our degree program are well attuned to this.
- Group work, young people, part time jobs, family commitments, iPhones and social expectations is a nightmare combination. Therefore the heavy reliance on another individual’s ability to meet deadlines and contribute similar levels of enthusiasm can cause conflict. In weeks 2 and 3 sessions are set aside on communication and how to avoid letting conflicting perspectives spiral out of control.
- Students need to come to the realisation that the project is the most important outcome of the subject. This is difficult to cultivate in a student because for the most part the third year at University is about them, their careers and the refinement of their craft. They wish and often demand to dominate this space with their skill and their creative vision. Therefore reining this in and placing this within the needs of a collective vision will always be the supreme challenge of such a programme.

6. How well does it work?

Students actually look forward – with a degree of trepidation but mostly with keen ambition - to Creative Exchange. Many second year students share New Media Arts electives with third year students so word gets around about the subject’s expectations and the workload. Some third year teams realise the opportunity of what’s before them and work quite productively between semesters and arrive in Week One with a fairly tight draft schedule for the next 3 months.

Feedback from students is excellent. Staff are also energised by being involved as consultants and/or mentors and the launch events – for the most part – provide a celebratory and collegial atmosphere that helps to break down the staff/student divide. Members of the public or industry observers often tell me that they are surprised to learn that the group behind a particular project/event are in fact students.

Student comments:

“Great for preparing for real industry work”

“Some people had projects which they could pursue as a business after leaving Uni”

“Brutal initial assessment of groups and projects was incredibly helpful.”

“We loved the Launch Event, it was a great night for us to showcase our hard work over the semester and also to put our name out there into the community – it has paid off greatly for us, picking up a lot of work in the aftermath!”

7. What problems / issues have arisen?

Student Workload

Again, this is an issue. There are two trains of thought on this. One is that the students are feeling immense pressure and therefore other subjects suffer and that we must provide either more credit or more room in the degree for the development of CXC projects. While the other staff perspective is that they believe the students are finally working at their full capacity and that this is therefore a realistic mind-set to take into the employment market.

Project Selection

I believe strongly in the students' ability to see what needs to be addressed in the market place, or what needs to be addressed socially or politically in the community, or what cultural markers they would like to critique or intersect with. So at this point I still persevere with allowing students to devise the majority of the projects. This can be problematic in terms of diversity of outcomes, setting the bar high enough in terms of innovation and complexity and conversely due to the dialogue around the expectations of the subject can cause students to be overly ambitious with the volume of components for any given project.

Due to the fixed nature of the subjects delivery, August-November, some fantastic external collaborative opportunities and/or potential clients are missed due to the rigidity of the subject's timing. More flexibility is needed in this area to capitalise on such opportunities in the future, however this does have resource implications.

External Students

For the majority of School of Creative Arts students CXC has been on their mind since late in their second year when they witness the trials and tribulations of their third year peers in the labs and studios via their shared discipline electives. External students however usually arrive in Week One without any inkling about the structure and demands of CXC apart from what they may have heard on the grapevine.

This presents a number of challenges:

- they do not feel the camaraderie that is already taking shape among the Creative Arts students;
- they do not feel the same sense of ownership of the project that their team members have fostered over the previous months;
- for many of them it is the first time they have encountered an interdisciplinary task of this magnitude;
- ambitious assessment timelines appear incredibly daunting.

On the plus side however, projects and their production teams are already well established and staff have a strong indication of the merits of particular projects and the gaps in expertise that could be filled in order to lift projects to the next level. Therefore, placing a business or marketing student with a project team that has the credentials and ambition to develop a product or a service beyond University has proven to be an ideal fit. In many cases IT students have already had experience of New Media Arts subjects with the strong links between our Media Design major and the School of IT, so these students present an easy and logical fit into projects with web and mobile app ambitions. Education students are at a particular disadvantage as the model of CXC appears to be extremely alien to their previous experience and they generally provide feedback which is either critical of the subject's structure or the freewheeling creative process that often kicks in later in the semester. However, this too has proven advantageous as numerous projects over the years have benefited enormously from the addition of an educational component – school performances, children's books, online educational resources, reflective teaching resources – which have fit snugly into their teaching portfolios.

Industry Intersections

It is always difficult to cast an Industry Panel. It is also sometimes difficult to explain the merits of constructive feedback with busy professionals who may not be as sympathetic to a student's situation in the same way as an academic might be. Of course, the opposite is also true.

What has surprised me over the last couple of years is that students take external (often blunt) criticism badly. In some cases negative or critical industry feedback can be earth shattering for a student or team of students, particularly if the feedback is coming from someone they admire or who they feel is closely aligned with the arts sector they feel they have aspirations towards. This has not been such a problem in the past and this has given me pause to wonder whether students are not maturing intellectually as early as they have previously as many of them lack the swagger and confidence I have observed in previous subjects at this level.

Staffing

As a general rule all School of Creative Arts staff are expected to be a part of the CXC process. However, the amount of input from staff varies and the genre or delivery platform of some of the projects can be intimidating to those staff who are more comfortable with more traditional outcomes. In some cases the focus of the advice given on discipline specific issues can be too narrow in what should be a collaborative context. Some staff are enthralled by the process and intimately involve themselves with the nuances of the projects while others are less forthcoming. This has been addressed somewhat in the most recent iteration with discipline coordinators directly enlisted in the assessment and moderation process which is also reflected more explicitly in their teaching load.

Structure

As academics we often complain that 13 weeks is not enough time to teach anything meaningful let alone develop, manage and execute a dozen or so major productions. Over the years there have been numerous refinements to assessment structure and curbing of over zealous project aims. Yet the core problem remains and that is the magnitude of what is expected of students – and the hours they willingly commit – to CXC.

This is being addressed by a broader rethink of parts of the degrees structure and a possible revision of the whole third year experience. Some ideas currently doing the rounds are:

- Giving a Semester One core subject over to the development of CXC projects entirely.
- Doubling the credit for Creative Exchange. However, this would be at the expense of a discipline subject and is unlikely to find favour with staff.
- Scaffolding primary negotiation and communication skills into subjects earlier in the core program.
- Creating cross-disciplinary assessment items across concurrently run subjects from different disciplines early on in the degree.
- Making the Semester Two third year experience a “professional practice” semester with no timetabled classes in the traditional fashion. This would allow more freedom to hold production meetings for CXC, bespoke sessions within each discipline with guest lectures and industry experts and allow staff to individually meet and discuss with students the progress of their final year folios.

8. How resource-intensive is it?

- The School believes strongly in the CXC ethos and the multi-disciplinary environment that is fostered in lab and studio spaces during the second half of each year by third year students and staff. During this period the entire production wing of the Creative Arts block is timetabled to CXC on Fridays in Semester Two.
- My coordination of the subject takes up my entire teaching load in Semester Two and involves many hours administrating the initial proposal phase and consultation across faculty and with potential clients and industry partners in the first half of the year.
- Five discipline staff are required to be on call for consultation with students throughout the semester as well as participating in four milestone review day long events, attendance at evening launch events and three full days of project moderation and feedback at the end of each year.
- Students fund their own projects so the School does not incur any cost on that front. Sometimes equipment borrowing from the Schools equipment store is ravaged by CXC projects during certain critical periods and the school has sprung for a few bits of extra kit or bespoke software plug-ins throughout the years.
- There are mooted plans to find physical space to renovate into a full-blown media arts production lab for third year students with preference given to CXC projects. Time will tell.

9. Details of support material / course work / assessment methods:

The school is currently assembling an online student gallery that will feature CXC projects. I will provide links when this comes to fruition. School site: <http://www.jcu.edu.au/soca/>